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C O N F I D E N T I A L DJIBOUTI 000563

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS EFFORTS TO RAISE
WOMEN'S AWARENESS IN DJIBOUTI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARGUERITA D. RAGSDALE.
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Minister of Women's Affairs Hawa Ahmed Youssef credits her awareness programs, first and foremost, with enlarging the voting lists of women in Djibouti. She told Ambassador that women are, unfortunately, still reluctant to become candidates for Parliament or for regional positions, despite her campaigns to broaden political participation. Conscious of the reluctance, though, she fought hard and won, in her words, to have a law passed in Djibouti that would set aside ten percent of all parliamentary seats and regional offices for women. She says there was fierce opposition from male parliamentarians, and it could not have happened without the support of President Guelleh. Now, there are seven women in Parliament.

12. (C) Asked by Ambassador to characterize the principal difficulty the Minister faces in managing the goals of her ministry, Hawa Youssef stated that it is the high illiteracy rate for Djibouti's women -- approximately 73 percent. This rate hinders written communication on issues especially when three local languages are required (Afar, Somali and Arabic) to inform women adequately on issues of concern to them. In some cases, pictures, rather than words, are used to carry messages, and this takes careful design and planning. She showed Ambassador a sample of her efforts in this area. In addition, skits are often employed and public appearances by the Minister with oral dialogue on various topics. She recently led a seminar, which traveled to several Djiboutian cities, on the rights of women and the importance of good governance. These techniques were also used to good effect, she said, during the launch of a campaign on HIV/AIDS awareness, anti-poverty strategies and legal rights of women in domestic situations.

13. (C) The Ministry of Women's Affairs widely publicized to women the new Family Code, passed this year, a copy of which she provided the Ambassador. (Note: The code is Shari'a based.) In addition, the Ministry gives legal counseling to battered women and to women seeking divorce, although Youssef admitted that many withdraw their petitions when confronted with the fear of losing income previously provided by their husbands. The Ministry of Women's Affairs also monitors mosques and Islamic centers in Djibouti for what Ahmed described as "anti-women propaganda" in order to circumscribe these teachings. She stressed to Ambassador that Djiboutian women are not influenced at all by women of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Islamic traditions have never been as strict, she said, as in Arab countries, but this does not prevent Djibouti's women from being good Muslims.

14. (C) Hawa Youssef sees use of the stimulant "khat" as a problem for both men and women in Djiboutian society. Its eradication is complicated by cultural habit, on the one hand, and by the need on the other for women to find sources of income for their families' needs. Khat selling may be the only form for some, especially widows. The challenge, she said, will be to find alternative sources of income for these women. The smoking of "shisha" pipes is also a greater problem currently among young women, the Minister said, and suggested that sports, economic support of sports, and programs for women might provide a diversion for these habits.

15. (C) Comment: Focused and sharp, Hawa Ahmed Youssef may be a good candidate for the International Visitors Program and Embassy will consider. She was born in 1961, has fair command of English, and holds a Master's Degree in Law from France. She was appointed in 1998 as Director of Women's Promotion, an office attached to the Presidency, before being appointed Minister in 1999. Prior to 1998, she was an advisor to the Minister of Finance. Hawa Ahmed Youssef is married and has three young children.

16. (C) Comment continued: Her relative youth has brought some criticism from those with whom Ambassador has spoken who see her as "not sufficiently combative" to make the changes on women's issues that will be required. Nevertheless, her commitment seems genuine and her method may be a conscious decision brought about by the need to survive among her sensitive, and powerful, male peers rather than to alienate. End comment.

